

Writing Back the Colonizer in Yeats' The Countess Cathleen

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Abstract

The history of the struggle between England and Ireland extends over the last eight centuries. Over this long period, England tried to capture the country with an iron fist but faced resistance from the Irish. Yeats' play The Countess Cathleen's events occur during a significant point of struggle in which the British Government neglected the Irish nation and left it to face a severe famine of its own. Following the thematic approach, this paper explains how the Irish nationalist poet, William Butler Yeats, represented the English politicians and Government during the Famine and in what way he showed the image of Irish Nationalists. This paper contains two sections with an abstract and a conclusion. In the first section, the paper gives an introduction to the work and its literary and historical background. The second section contains a detailed analysis of the representation of colonisers in Yeats' play.

Keywords:- Writing Back, the Colonizer, Yeats, The Countess Cathleen

1.1. Introduction

The history of relationship between England and Ireland is not filled with bright moments. In fact, it is filled with tensions and struggles that started-and did not end with the Norman invasion of Ireland during the 12th century. This invasion was followed by multiple attempts of independence and counter-invasion of the Island by The English. This tension history continued until the country was included in the great British Empire in the Act of Union, (Jan. 1, 1801). The last act, however, sparked further critical comments from Irish thinkers that the citizens deeply heard during the Great Famine (Stamp).

Methodology

Its relationship with Modernism, Mahmood and Almaarof claim, articulates Postmodernism in literature. (2022,3) It is, of course, because Postmodernism is distinguished in presenting new ideologies that may conflict with the dominant ones. Postmodernist literature differs from the

literary form of Modernism. This paper follows one of the postmodernist techniques of analysing the texts: writing back.

Discussion

The great Irish Famine of the 1840s and after was a significant concern of nationalists that wrote on Irish subject matters, including Yeats. The potato harvest of 1845 failed across the nation and failed again in the following years. The Countess Cathleen's historical setting is A Great Famine. Landlord evacuations reached pandemic levels following a different but less catastrophic crop failure and Famine at the end of the 1880s, especially in Donegal, where Maud Gonne was pushing herself to weariness for the sake of the farmers. The statistics she uses in her memoir are not much overstated; for example, Ireland's population was barely half what it was on the brink of the great Famine at the end of the eighteenth century (Farmeloe 9-8).

The Famine had a wide range of reasons. In hindsight, a substantial chunk of Irish citizens' dependence on a single crop rendered them highly helpless to a disease like potato blight. The blight was little known, and it was just bad luck that multiple cool, rainy summers accelerated its spread. However, two entirely different problems contributed to the British Government's inability to address Ireland's impoverished fully. The first was the general lack of knowledge about the famine-era circumstances in Ireland. The first thing was spreading ignorance concerning general conditions in Ireland even before the worst time of the Famine. Most people thought that news of severe starvation was exaggerated, partially because non-specialists had no clue how dependent Ireland's citizens were on the potato. The second was thought that the revolutionary, greedy, and primarily Catholic Irish people had somehow caused this disaster to themselves (Mcgreevy).

The British Government had no part in the Irish dependence on the potato or disease that corrupted successive crops. Yet, the British officials had it in their capacity to ameliorate or perhaps even remove the starvation that followed wholly. They decided not to do this. For these causes, the Great Famine is usually considered one of the biggest failures of any modern Western country to defend its people against blight and starvation (Mcgreevy).

Yeats established the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899 with the assistance of Lady Gregory, George Moore, and Edward Martyn, which became a hallmark of Irish theatrical history. Their movement sought to establish an Irish National Theatre where they could perform and stage plays in Irish or English that were either written by Irish authors or on Irish issues. Additionally, they supported plays written by foreign authors that would serve to inform and pique the nation's interest in the more sophisticated elements of dramatic art (Imanishi 2).

With relatively few exceptions, Yeats' plays deal directly or indirectly, with his country's political condition, from Countess Cathleen, which has a nationalist basis, to The Death of Cuchulain, whose epilogue alludes to the Easter Rising. All his works tackle the political atmosphere of the country. His expertise in actual politics enables a realistic, down-to-earth assessment, allowing for a considerably thoughtful approach to his plays (Farmeloe 18).

The narrative is based on a straightforward tradition about Countess Cathleen, an Irish noblewoman. She sacrifices her affection for the poet Aleel to save her people during a famine.

The Countess offers her precious soul in exchange for 500,000 crowns to be given to the underprivileged farmers rather than witnessing her peasants trade their souls to the demons for money to stay alive. She has been put in this situation due to the two devils dressed as merchants that rob her fortune. Additionally, they mislead her by saying that her food supplies, meant to feed the hungry, have been delayed indefinitely. The Countess passes away, but the angels successfully wrestle her soul from the devils in a fierce conflict at the end. The Countess is allowed to enter paradise since she offered her soul out of goodwill (Cardullo 49).

Yeats later said of Cathleen: "She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away, I But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it. I thought my dear must her soul destroy, I So did fanaticism and hate to enslave it" (qt. in Watanbe 228). In 1891, Yeats read a draft of the play to Maud Gonne, who met him on May 6, 1889, and for whom he structured the role of Cathleen for the stage. He told Maud Gonne that Cathleen is "a symbol of all souls that lose their peace, their fineness in politics, serving but change." (qt. in Watanbe 228)

1.2. Writing Back The Colonizer in The Play

One of the most disgraceful moments in the history of the British Empire was the Great Famine of 1846–1849. More than a million British people were permitted to perish from illness and Famine, which was awful enough, but this occurred while grain that could have fed them was shipped or stored in secure warehouses (Mcgreevy). Norman Jeffares and A.S. Knowland wrote in their A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats:

The view of Ireland starving is often taken at a nationalistic level as the result of English exploitation. However, it is worth noting that there is plenty of food in the presumably Irish Countess's house and the mountains. The starvation symbolises spiritual poverty, the consequence of men selling their souls to the devils of materialism. (qt. in Cardullo 49).

The drama, set during the Famine, is nationalistic since the Irish blamed the British for it. The Protestants began their battle to convert Catholics to Protestantism by taking advantage of the poor peasants' desperate need for food. Additionally, the Irish believed that the British were the primary cause of the Famine and that God had brought the blight over them. These components have all been put into the setting. The setting is a peasant's hut, which embodies Irishness in the true sense of the word. Except for Aleel, who is Yeats and was formerly the king of "Connaught," the protagonists are essentially the same as they were in the original narrative. Aleel's wife Maeve, who named Cuchulain as their warrior, is known, with Aleel, for passing judgment. They are both linked to the fabled realm of pagan gods, which reflects the nature of Irish religion before English control (Al-Youssef 7-8).

This drama is metaphorical rather than historically accurate. One should go within one's heart to find Countess Cathleen, the villagers, and the devils. The clothing and setting have been chosen to keep the indeterminate. Despite Yeats' assertion, common reactions and critical commentary have focused on the play's degree of Irish history realism. It received heavy criticism for distorting social and historical truth or portraying a deplorable image of the Irish people. It was unavoidable, in part because certain Irish peasants in the play were very immoral, greedy, and superstitious at a period when such a negative perception of the Irish was about to be

corrected. The play has received vehement responses, which attest to its contentious nature in the historical and cultural setting and its evocative force as a powerfully symbolic piece (Ikeda 188).

It is noteworthy that despite its symbolic meaning, the devil-merchants are the only characters with no real historical connection to Ireland, the other characters, or even the land itself. When these devils travel, they do so in the shape and colour of "horned owls" (Yeats 22).

The use of owls here is significant as migratory creatures of the air. They get the food they need from the land but do not live on it. If a specific hunting spot fails to produce enough food, they can quickly leave for another. The merchants, thus, are strangers to the land and the cottagers. They are foreigners and not "earthly" in the technical meaning of the word. They have no linkage whatsoever to Ireland; instead, they can come and go, capturing and selling as they desire (Moir, Jr. 114-115).

The story concentrates on Cathleen and the people around her. In pursuit of the childhood home she remembers, an "old grey castle with a kitchen garden, / A cider orchard, and plot for flowers" (17), The Countess Cathleen has set out on a journey. The play has a metaphorical meaning that is centred on Mary's offer to Cathleen to show her the path to the castle: "We know it, lady. / A place that's set among impassable walls / As though the world's trouble could not find it out" (18). In a significant move, Cathleen travels to a bygone era to locate something she already has but cannot seem to locate. Flight from starvation only results in a sharp turn toward a collapsing old-world order. After finding a way, the Countess discovers that she has already gone too far and cannot turn back, which resembles the Irish awakening against the English during Famine (Watanbe 215).

The play's unappealing discontent is established by Mary's worrying, who is the mother of Teigue and the wife of the rustic Schemas Rua. Mary first conjured up the cozy picture of a grey hen flapping. A herdsman observed a man in the graveyard who had "a wall of flesh" (12) for a face and was missing his lips, eyes, and ears. When Cathleen entered the cabin, Mary had stated: "impassable walls" (12), which contrasts with the significant wall of flesh picture of the two devils (Watanbe 215).

Historical events in the play include Shemus seeking employment and being driven away by beggars; throughout the Famine, it was common to see numerous beggars but uncommon to find employment. When he gets home, he talks about how the Famine caused all wild creatures to perish and lists the "badger" as one of those extinct species. The badger is believed to be connected to shape-shifting, but rats are believed to be connected to prophesy and "precognitive ability" and to predict death when they leave a dwelling (Al-Youssef 8). Aleel says to Shemus:

Shut the door before the night has fallen.
For who can say what walks or in what shape
Some devilish creature flies in the air, but now
Two grey-horned owls hooted above our heads (22).

The poet was believed to tell prophecies. It foreshadows the coming of the two devils into the cottage and trying to purchase the inhabitants' souls. Shemus first readily agrees to the

arrangement because, in his words, "What has God poured out of His bag but famine? / Satan gives money" (32). The First Merchant corrects Shemus as follows:

But, no, not yet,
For there is a work I have to set you to
...
That is for the work. Each has its separate price;
But neither price is paid till the work's done (32).

Teigue and Shemus decide to put their Christian souls to work for a marketing campaign for the devils, instructing them to "cry forth at every crossroads" and proclaim,

we buy men's souls
And give so reasonable a price that all may live
In mirth and comfort till the Famine has done (33).

Later, Mary questions why the demons do not help the hungry people; they claim to be aware of the "evil of mere charity." It is a reference to how Britain was hesitant to aid the hungry mouths in Ireland under the same pretence because the British Treasure Secretary was worried that increasing the wealth of the poor would lead to population growth (Al-Youssef 8), making the issue worse:

Cathleen: A learned theologian has laid down
That starving man may take what is necessary,
And yet be sinless.

....
And if it is a sin, while faith is unbroken
God cannot help but pardon (46).

The merchants regard Mary's home as their own, much as England did with Ireland. Yeats intended to remind his villagers of this because he believed that Irishmen who sacrificed their souls -the core of their identity—showed failure in this situation. But the fact that it exposed the frail side of Irishmen at a time when Yeats sought to encourage his people to learn from their faults was the cause this piece was not warmly received. The idea that Irish citizens should be allowed to give up their souls offended the audience since it was seen as a direct assault on Irish Catholic teaching (Lonar-Vujnovi and Andrejevi 187).

Cathleen commands her staff to feed the peasants till the house falls. It is connected to how homes and churches served as refuge and food throughout the Famine. She and the demons also discuss the arrival of ships carrying food. In reality, food was brought from India to Ireland. Although implausible, this is one of the explanations for why the merchants dress and sit in an Eastern style. In addition, the demons' talk regarding the expected delivery of oxen and grain in three days is mentioned in the play, along with the robbery of Cathleen's goods. Due to the notion that the number three is lucky, it is most frequently employed. But the historical reality is that Ireland exported livestock and food during the Famine (Al-Youssef 9-10).

The traders take Cathleen's money and gold to force additional peasants, along with Countess Cathleen, to surrender their souls. The bags are transported by spirits rather than by devils. When Mary questions the merchants about whether or not they are devils and why they do not donate to the needy, the merchants point to their dedication to converting peasants into employees and even businesspeople. The people should exchange their souls for wealth rather than live a life devoted to farm labour since doing so will make them immune to Famine. A human's soul serves as a metaphor. The merchants lure the rural dwellers into selling their eternal souls, which is to trade the spiritual for the physical, the unseen for what is seen, and confidence in God for faith in money. They do so because they lack food, cattle, farms, and tools. The commercial master wants them to labour diligently and fearlessly, like a devil's child (Watanbe 215).

During his fruitless endeavours to alleviate the Countess's troubles, Aleel, the pagan poet, sings about such a heavenly-like environment. Cathleen carries these difficulties because she is committed to serving the underprivileged and believes in Christianity. This argument is most evident when Aleel visits the devils to have his soul taken for nothing. They claim they cannot steal Aleel's soul; he mocks their little strength compared to his, and even he strikes dread into the hearts of the devils. To calm his terrified spirit, the devil kisses the circlet where his master's lips formerly rested on it (Al-Youssef 11).

Aleel sings while Cathleen lays on his arm. Shemus and Teigue rush in to announce the soul exchange, saying, "Money for souls, good money for a soul" (33). When Cathleen hears this, she is frightened by the thought of it. She offers her property because she believes she must stop it.

Keeping this house alone, sell all I have,
Go barter where you please, but come again
With heads of cattle and with ships of the meal. (51)

This speech foretells her awful fate. Aleel, who has seen a bizarre vision, pleads in the third scene. Cathleen escaped and lived comfortably in the hills (Imanishi 2).

.. and live in the hills,
Among the sounds of music and the light
Of waters, till the evil days are done.
For here some terrible death is waiting for you . . . (58)

To bring the actual area where Christianity blossomed, Yeats dug extremely profoundly into history. In doing so, he demonstrated that Christianity is more recent than what was previously understood in Ireland. He shows that Christianity drew its doctrines from more ancient ones that originated in Celtic-Buddhism in that country. So, surrendering one's self is a betrayal of Christianity but not a betrayal of the nation. In this drama, selling souls represents a return to the pre-Christian worldview, which for Yeats, represents a resurgence of nationhood (Al-Youssef 20).

However, Cathleen maintains her moral obligation and does not back down. Aleel is ignored by her: "I kiss your forehead./And yet I send you from me. ... Good-bye; but do not turn your head and look;/Above all else, I would not have you look" (28). Soon after, the two demons invade Cathleen's palace and take all she owns. With this information, she gets desperate and decides to make the ultimate sacrifice for the starving people. She knows that her time is running out and must do something with it.

I have heard
A sound of wailing in unnumbered hovels,
And I must go down, down--I know not where-
Pray for all men and women mad from Famine;
Pray, you good neighbours.
Mary, Queen of angles,
And all you clouds on clouds of saints, farewell! (34)

Then Countess Cathleen appears and wants at least 500,000 crowns in exchange for her soul. The devils consent and they demand that she sign with a quill, a representation of rejecting God. She then gives the gold to everyone before passing away (Imanishi 7).

Cathleen has given Ireland's soul to pre-Christianity by selling her soul, removing the necessity for the farmers to sell their souls to later entities. Since they are not concerned with selling individual souls, the demons require Cathleen to sell hers instead. Once her soul is returned to its pre-Christian state, they liberate the souls that have already been sold. In other words, this identity is personal as opposed to national. The national identity may be purchased without needing a particular person's soul. More precisely, there is no need to restore every person's soul to pre-Christianity when the national identity is brought back to its pre-Christian roots. One must consider Christianity as the primary source of this Famine upon returning to the scene and discovering that the area is "famine struck" and finishes in heaven. Christianity is now able to spread to Britain. Yeats blames the British for starting the Famine at this point; while Christianity is a religion, it is linked to Britain. To compare the genuine Irish national identity to the sparkling gold is to say that it is wealth for souls (Al-youssef 21).

Consolidating the diverse parts of identity into one is the most excellent method to create a national identity since the Irish state was confused by conflicting views. And establish it as a national symbol. Additionally, anything not part of the soul's essence is taken away when it is sold. Countess Cathleen sold her entire false portion of her soul—Christianity—when she sold her soul. Yeats meant to suggest that all pre-Christian religions—Catholicism, Protestantism, and Celtic Buddhism—worship the same God and can merge into one patriotic identity that unites them all.

While inspired people will climb to Hell, individuals like Countess Cathleen ascend to paradise. Yeats' allusion to the difference between Hell and Heaven is a play on Catholicism's rigid definitions of virtue and sin. Both the Irish and the Yoruba worlds, which contrast with the western idea of moral paradigm, lack such precise demarcation (Akinlotan 10). One more note on the angels' defence of Cathleen's redemption: God always judges behaviour based on motivation,

not execution. Most of the time, one's motivation is hidden from view; it exists only in the heart, and his religion is made clear by the manner he worships. Ireland's past and present are currently intertwined. Faiths are united once again at their core message as the seemingly sinful join the moral at heaven.

A juxtaposition of Yeats' depiction of Irish society and the one that most of his people saw in front of them reveals the political significance ingrained in the play. He displayed their appreciation for Ireland with a responsible ruling elite and a struggling, misinformed tenant who was finally content to settle back into their place in the system. They saw an Ireland with a careless elite and a rebellious tenant striving for justice and independence. However, the universe of Countess Cathleen was neither what Ireland was nor what the public desired. As a result, the audience did not share his utopian ideals. Yeats did not intend to generate propaganda, but the initial effort fell short because it was understood to be propaganda (Frazier 465).

In his *Plays and Controversies* (1923), Yeats stated that *The Countess Cathleen* had given him "more pleasure in the memory" than any of his other plays. Thus, Yeats' first play has the archetypal figure of a Faust hovering overhead. Yeats invented and increased the role of Aleel, the poet, as his voice and view weaved into the events of the original folktale. Aleel observes: "And all their heads are twisted to one side, / For when they lived they warred on beauty and peace / With obstinate, crafty, sidelong glances." (105). In the conversation between Aleel, would-be suitor of Cathleen, and Oona, foster mother, a pure sense of lost love is felt. In selling off her soul, Countess Cathleen has sacrificed her life, her people, and her family. She is engulfed in a Faustian trap, but the motives that guide her are pretty different and noble (Watanbe 227).

Aleel witnesses an aerial battle between angels and demons in a vision. Thunder immediately follows a lightning flash. Aleel does an excellent job of evoking the thunderclaps and lightning flashes, heightening the wrong impression. His account is rife with references to myths. Then the world becomes completely dark. The mighty angels emerge in front of them when a visionary light pierces the darkness. Aleel summarises Cathleen's destiny at the conclusion saying that angels have carried her to heaven (Imanishi 8).

In "Countess Cathleen in Paradise", Yeats shows that all the pain and suffering ends after death. Cathleen departs the mortal body for the glorious immortality of martyrdom and duty. Thus, Cathleen is bathed in holy water that lifts her above those who stood idle before the Irish suffering. Yeats describes Cathleen with a pure beauty that suits her sacrifice. The poem ends with a triumphal assurance of the uniqueness of Cathleen's soul: "All the heavens bow down to Heaven.!" (qt in. Watanbe 218).

Conclusion

Yeats has mixed several elements from Pre-Christian Ireland with his Present-day country and have placed all of that in a historically informed setting. Yeats aims at calling for a genuine and truthful Ireland that refuses the gold or glamour of the conquerors. He wants his country to rise and his people to be like the Countess, firm and solid in their dependence on who they are. He also shows the image of patriotic Cathleen as an angelic warrior to alleviate the stats of the

nationalists, all that while presenting the image of colonizing England as two devils that purchase people's souls and identities for little in return.

إعادة كتابة المستعمر في بيتس الكونتيسة كاتلين

المستخلص

يمتد تاريخ الصراع بين إنجلترا وأيرلندا على مدى القرون الثمانية الماضية. خلال هذه الفترة الطويلة، حاولت إنجلترا الاستيلاء على البلاد بقبضة من حديد لكنها واجهت مقاومة من الأيرلنديين. تحدث أحداث مسرحية بيتس الكونتيسة كاتلين خلال نقطة صراع مهمة أهملت فيها الحكومة البريطانية الأمة الأيرلندية وتركها تواجه مجاعة شديدة خاصة بها. باتباع النهج الموضوعي، تشرح هذه الورقة كيف مثل الشاعر القومي الأيرلندي، ويليام بتلر بيتس، السياسيين والحكومة الإنجليز خلال المجاعة وبأي طريقة أظهر صورة القوميين الأيرلنديين. تحتوي هذه الورقة على قسمين مع ملخص وخاتمة. في القسم الأول، تقدم الورقة مقدمة للعمل وخلفيته الأدبية والتاريخية. يحتوي القسم الثاني على تحليل مفصل لتمثيل المستعمرين في مسرحية بيتس

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